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## **Single Mothers: Strategies of Family Management and Support Systems in Relation to Health**

By Pooja Shree Mishra<sup>1</sup>, Apparao Thamminaina<sup>2</sup>, Niharman Mishra<sup>3</sup>

### **Abstract**

The status of women in contemporary society is a vital aspect of debates concerning gender inequality, women's subordination, violence against women, and women's empowerment. The responses of women to these problems vary across different social and spatial categories. One of the significant responses is the change in the family structure that leads to the emergence of single-parent families, particularly single-mother families. Few studies in the Indian context deal with the causes of rising numbers of single-mother families. Furthermore, there are no significant studies concerning the issues single mothers face. Being single and a mother is a significant challenge for a woman in Indian society. A divorced single mother faces various constraints and challenges while leading a household after the marital disruption. Single mothers face many physical and psychological problems, including taking care of herself and children in matters of health and well-being. The present study investigates the constraints of divorced single mothers concerning their social support systems and family management strategies as they influence mental and physical health. The study is an outcome of twenty-five case studies of divorced single mothers residing in Hyderabad, India. The results are drawn using interpretive phenomenological analysis.

*Keywords:* Single-mothers, Divorce, Constraints, Health

### **Introduction**

To understand the role and status of women in a society, the differences between men and women must be analysed. Various studies analyse the identities, positions, and functions of women from diverse societies. These studies focus on the idea of what it means to be a woman and how people perceive and treat women in different cultures. In a given society, the status of women depends on the power relationship between men and women. This power relationship system is the basis for "patriarchy," which we find is prevalent in India's context. The term "patriarchy" is used to describe a male-dominated society. In such a system, women are under the subordination of men in various ways. There are various forms of subordination

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that women experience. These forms include discrimination, neglect, degradation, control, exploitation, oppression, and violence. These forms of subordination exist within the family, at workplaces, and in the greater society (Bhasin, 2000). All structures of interpersonal domination are due to the subordination of women, but according to some contemporary feminist theories, there are different causes of subordination. Simone de Beauvoir argues that as men view women as fundamentally different from themselves, women are declined to the status of the Second Sex and hence subordinate (Beauvior, 1974). Millet (1977) argues that women are the dependent class under patriarchal domination. The subordination of women in the family can occur in two different ways. First, daughters face discrimination from other family members when there is a preference for sons. When a woman marries and becomes a daughter-in-law to a family, she faces another type of subordination from her male partner or in-law family members.

In a marital relationship, a woman's role and position are vital if both partners value their mutual activity, and thus, they will achieve solidarity and a sustained relationship (Nakonezny & Denton, 2008). However, factors like women's subordination, discrimination against women, and the perception of woman's position in the family affect family solidarity and relationships. There has been a significant transformation in the urban family system, where new occupations, improvements in education, income disparities, and spatial distance are the main factors that affect family relations (Dube, 1990). These factors also form the reason for changes in the family system in Indian society, leading to the formation of single-mother families.

### **Who are Single Mothers?**

Women play a central role in preserving humanity. According to the law of nature, a woman's most important duty is to become a mother and take care of children. Middle-class women believe that marriage is essential for motherhood (Hertz, 2006). Even though there have been social changes, the taken-for-granted belief of compulsory motherhood (that all women aspire to have children) becomes a critical part of women's value to society. Becoming a mother is also a fundamental part of being a woman, a powerful form of social control. It is necessary to understand the concept of "single woman" to define "single mother." Those who have reached a marriageable age and are not yet married, or widows, divorced, separated are single women (Krishnakumari, 1987).

Historically and culturally, women have been defined from the perspective of men. According to Simone De Beauvoir (1972), men believe that they are reasonable, the absolute, correct, and autonomous individuals while women are "the other" (Gordon, 1994). It is observed that single women are isolated and frustrated and thus forever incomplete (Smith, 1951). Thus, the complementary relationship between men and women is significant in structuring gender relations. In two different ways, a woman can be single if she is without a romantic partner or without a partner with which she could parent.

Single parents have taken the responsibility of raising a child or children as the dominant caregiver and are not living with a spouse or partner (Partners in development initiatives, 2011). Single parents can be of different categories, like those women who are widows, divorced, or separated. There has been an increase in single-parent families due to divorce or separation of married couples. In the United States and other countries, single parenting has become an accepted trend. It is common knowledge that since the 1960s, there has been an increase in the number of children living with single parents. Such estimation is not available in India; instead, there is an estimation of the number of divorced, separated, and widowed persons.

## **Emergence of Single-Mother Families**

The basic unit of society is the family. The process of socialization takes place through the family. Family life has been enhanced due to society's progress and modernity (Harlambos & Holborn, 2002). There are different perspectives about family studies that have contributed to understanding the roles, functions, forms, existence, growth, and decline of the family in the present changing world (Sooryamoorthy, 2012).

The types of relationships within Indian families are not always the same. There are differences in the roles and relationships within the family structure. The changes in society related to the environment, values, structures, and the inability to cope with such changes, influenced the Indian family (Shah, 2005). In India, the family is an ideal homogenous unit with active coping mechanisms. It has a plurality of forms that varies with class, ethnicity, and individual choices. The impact of industrialization and urbanization on the Indian family system has helped researchers investigate the dimensions of the Indian family. These dimensions include the study of parent-child relationships, marital relationships, conflicts, change in roles, and power relations (Chekki, 1988). With the increasing growth of India's population, there has also been a growth of urbanization at a significant pace. The family systems in India are affected by the process of urbanization. Families in India find changes in their structure due to demographic characteristics, socio-religious beliefs, and practices. The inequality between male and female members of the family emphasizes the patriarchal structure of the Indian family system, according to Hinduism's belief (Kapadia, 1972). There is a transformation in the Indian family system with the influence of westernization, modernization, and globalization. Women gain exposure through their increasing participation in education and employment opportunities.

Constitutional safeguards ensure rights and safety-nets to women. The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955; the Hindu Succession Act, 1956; the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961; and the Divorce Reform Act, 1969, led to the empowerment of women and influenced the family system (Pylee, 1979). These changes regarding women's status have helped women by increasing their ability to earn income, make decisions in their family life, and make choices in various other aspects of their lives, thus forming single-mother families in India's cities.

## **Divorce: A Cause for Single Motherhood**

The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, states that any marriage is dissolved by a decree of divorce by a petition presented by either the husband or the wife, on the grounds mentioned therein. This Act extends to the whole of India except the state of Jammu and Kashmir. There are various causes for divorce to take place. These causes include cruelty of a husband towards his wife, interference of in-laws, extramarital relations, mental health issues, economic hardships, unplanned marriages, education, economic independence of women, conservative attitudes of males and in-laws towards the spouse, and sexual maladjustment. There can also be environmental and personality factors (Pothen, 1986; Choudhary, 1988). However, with recent social changes and their implications for women's lives, there has been a change in the thoughts of any marital relationship and the causes of marital disruption. A marriage that used to be a sacred bond between partners has changed its notion to some extent. Rivalry arises within a couple when expectations are not fulfilled as demanded. Most complaints of a wife about her husband are based on the husband's unpredictable nature. They also complain of a lack of mutually handling family decisions. Instead, women find they are left with the burden of taking care of things alone. Though women have the opportunity to work and enhance their talents in any field of their interest, family responsibilities constrain women. Another reason for divorce is incompatibility between partners. Misunderstandings between the partners,

extramarital affairs by the husband, and lack of trust in the wife are some of the recent causes of divorce in Indian society. These reasons have led to an increase in the divorce rate in India.

Marital disruption affects women's mental status to a more considerable extent and, more importantly, even more so if she is a mother of a child. Mostly it is found that after the divorce, the mother takes the custody of the child. Hence, there is an impact on both the child and the mother's wellbeing due to divorce. After divorce, women have to play the role of a single mother, which is a difficult task and a challenge to be accepted in male-dominated Indian society.

### **Constraints of Single Mothers**

Single mothers, whether widows, separated, or divorcees, face various societal problems when it comes to different issues. The main struggle comes from when they take responsibility to lead a family all alone. In India, there are several disadvantages for women who are the head of a household. Firstly, there is an economic vulnerability in the household. Secondly, there is social isolation for a single-mother household since the bonds formed due to marriage alliances are absent (Swain & Pillai, 2005). Due to the marital disruption of divorce, single mothers face many challenges in society. The most vital issue is being a divorcee and taking custody of the child(ren). In such a case, a woman may lose support from her partner and his family, which further leads to economic hardships and problems of security. Apart from this, there are problems with solely managing the family and taking care of children.

The challenges faced by a single mother also depend on the type of marriage she went through before the divorce. An improved post-divorced life is often dependent on the nature of the divorce agreement, the relationship with family members and decisions about her life that a woman makes. However, if there is a lack of support from her family members after the divorce, then there are many challenges she needs to handle by herself. According to Mehta (1975), problems faced by divorced women are dependent on their economic and social status, their identity with caste groups, level of education, the atmosphere they come from (either traditional or western-oriented), and economic independence (Bharat, 1988).

Social stigma is a significant constraint for single mothers. Stigmas exist when there is labelling, stereotyping, segregation, status loss, and discrimination in a power situation (Link & Phelan, 2001). The disapproval of divorce by relatives, the experience of taking the blame for a divorce, social exclusion from married women, and demoralization (Gerstel, 1987) are a few markers of social stigma. Due to social stigma, divorced women in India often avoid revealing their identity as single mothers. Women may avoid attending social functions or rituals since they would be stereotyped or discriminated against by others, and even these women might view themselves negatively. The children of single mother's face problems at school and among their peer groups. The challenges of single mothers affect physical and psychological health. Some single mothers experience severe emotional consequences such as insomnia, restlessness, anxiety, depression, feelings of unworthiness, aggression, and even suicide attempts.

## **Objectives of the Study**

The proposed study has the following objectives:

- To explore single mother's family management strategies.
- To analyse the support systems of single mothers.
- To examine the challenges of single mothers and their health effects.

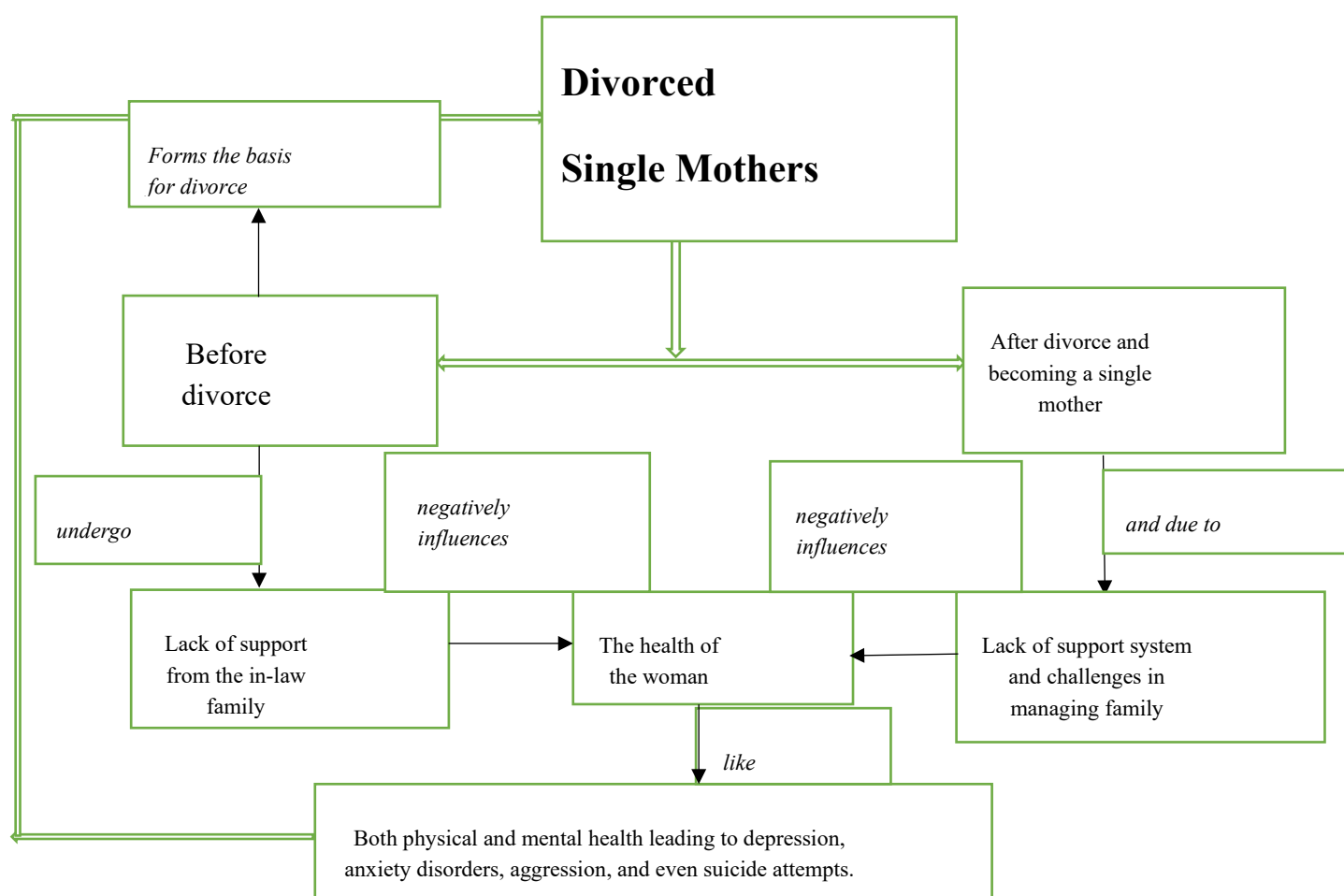
## **Theoretical Framework, Concept Mapping, and Methodology of the Study**

One of the significant consequences of divorce concerns the family's support system to a divorced woman with children. The family system theory (Bowen, 1978) examines the psychological functioning or dysfunction of family processes. This perspective helps in understanding the interaction between children and spouses and the reciprocal influences of the interactions. The child care practices of a divorced mother will help to understand the relationship between the child and the divorced mother in a single-mother family. If support systems are absent from the family, it will increase stress for divorced women. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Bowlby, 1973; Bowlby, 1989; Bowen, 1978; Birnbaum et al., 1997) examines the emotional bond between an infant and his or her primary caregiver, typically the mother. It also considers the risk of divorce as well as the coping and adjustment processes related to divorce.

The social stigma attached to divorced single mothers increases their stress levels. It is not easy to maintain a balance between childcare practices and work if the mother is employed. Family management theory (Nickols, 1979) considers how single mothers can set new goals for their lives, adjust their standard of living, and make proper decisions.

The concept map given below helps readers to understand the study better and takes into account the theoretical framework and the literature on single mothers described above. It further relates the support systems and family management strategies relating to the health aspects of single mothers.

**Figure 1: Concept Map**



As shown in the concept map, mothers who end up divorced often face a lack of support from their in-law families before the divorce, which negatively affects their health both physically and mentally. Especially when a woman is pregnant, there is a deterioration in her health. During pregnancy, most of these women do not get proper support from their in-laws or husbands. They manage the family and their work alone. On the other hand, when women get divorced and lead a single mother's life, they still face problems getting support from their own natal family. There are also problems where they cannot manage their family and work together and take care of the child. Thus, it negatively impacts both their physical and mental health. All these health effects simultaneously form the reasons for marital disturbances such as mental and physical torture, further leading to divorce.

## Methodology

### *Definition of Single Mothers*

In the study, single mothers are defined as women who are legally divorced and have taken custody of children.



### *Area of Study*

The study area is Hyderabad, a city in the state of Telangana, India. According to the Census of India, 2011, the undivided Andhra Pradesh (Telangana formed as a separate state from Andhra Pradesh on 2nd June 2014) has 138,786 divorcees, followed by Maharashtra (112,973), and Tamil Nadu (127,935).

### *Sample Selection*

For the proposed study, twenty-five cases of divorced single mothers who are also heading their family were selected. All the cases reside in Hyderabad, India. Most of the cases are working women with an annual income of 5lakh to 10lakh. Women aged 35 years or older were selected, and the oldest interviewee was 56 years old. The interviewees were identified using sources like family courts, NGOs, and advocates, as well as by applying the snowballing method. The sample was finalized by gaining the consent of the women.

### *Data Collection*

The study was conducted using the exploratory research design. The researcher had direct contact with the respondents. In semi-structured interviews, the participants shared their life experiences related to family upbringing, marriage, marital lifestyle, divorce, and the challenges of being single mothers in later stages of life. Through the case study method of data collection and the phenomenological analysis of the interview data, the study explores the support systems, family management strategies, and health aspects related to single mothers' experiences.

### *Analysis and Findings*

The twenty-five cases were analyzed to understand the support systems and family management strategies, particularly related to aspects of their health. The application of the phenomenological method resulted in finding the position of women in the family when they were in a marital relationship and the change in status when they became single mothers. The health effects experienced by these women resemble their constraints in the family and by being a single mother.

## **Findings of the Study**

### *The Support System and Health Effects*

There are various types of support systems for single mothers. Support comes from society, family members, peer groups, and organizations that help women facing problems. These social supports help women in taking care of their health and well-being. There are lower physical and mental health risks when social support is high (Rousou et al., 2016). Lack of a support system disturbs women both mentally and physically. There are also higher rates of psychological distress, mood distress, and anxiety disorders among single mothers.

### *Irresponsible Nature of Husband*

Generally, health problems arise when women take full responsibility for the family and engage in a job after the marriage. Not all women volunteer to work after marriage, but the circumstances force them. In particular, the attitude of the husband and lack of essential support to their family make it mandatory for a woman to earn a livelihood.

Case 10 says:

“[My husband] did some manipulation in his office regarding accounts and lost the job. I was pregnant at that time. Moreover, it was shocking to know that he



had manipulated around 300000 rupees. As a result, he was not eligible to apply for any other job. He stayed at home without work. It led to occasional disturbances in the family. Around the same time, I got gestational diabetes. I could not take leave due to the need for income. If he could have done the job, I could never have left him.”

#### *Lack of Support from the Husband*

A woman always expects support from her in-law family members. More importantly, she considers the support of her husband as vital. Nevertheless, in many cases, the respondents did not secure the husband’s support and found it difficult to handle situations. It affects the mental health of women in various ways.

Case 9 explained the lack of her husband’s support. She said:

“I used to do the entire work of the family every day. However, nobody in the family is concerned about my well-being. They never ask whether I take food or not, including my husband. It has become a routine to serve the family without any recognition for the work. My mother-in-law did not behave well with me. She used to assign work even while I was eating. It was very painful. I was not able to tolerate atrocious behaviour and it turned aggressive at times. The in-laws and husband were beating me during such situations. I was beaten up many times, even during pregnancy. My husband never took me to the hospital. He completely ignored me. Mother-in-law’s family treated me as a servant.”

#### *Mental Stress during Pregnancy*

A woman’s situation is fragile during pregnancy. Women go through mental stress over the preference for male babies in Indian society. The family blames a woman for not giving birth to a baby boy. It affects the mental health of women during pregnancy.

Case 4 revealed:

“When I was in the fifth month, my husband took me to ‘Kaba’ (sacred site of Islam) and told me to pray for the child. He [My husband] said God is there; he will make the impossible possible. Later, while visiting the doctor, he said that a girl is a mercy, and a boy is a blessing. The doctor said it is a girl. My husband did not want a daughter. Though his parents did not know about gender, they were insisting on having a boy. There was continuous mental torture. We fought with each other even one day before the delivery. I got suffocated, which led to breathing problems.”

#### *Lack of Support during Pregnancy*

During pregnancy, many interviewees reported a lack of support from the husband and in-law’s family for appropriate health checkups. Pregnant woman either manage to go to a hospital, or sometimes must get help from their own parents. They must continue working during pregnancy as in-law’s demand additional income. Such pressure creates physical and psychological problems for women.

Case 6 says:

“I had jaundice during the sixth month of pregnancy. My mother-in-law’s family did not allow me to go to the hospital. They forced me to continue my job even in pregnancy. My father-in-law advised to learn from the industrious

women of *Lambada* community. The doctor advised me not to climb stairs during pregnancy, but in-laws insisted on engaging in all types of work, stating I am not an angel.”

Case 19 explained that:

“I had heavy vomiting during pregnancy, and my mother-in-law used to prepare the rice, which was of poor quality. Lack of nutritious food impacted my health. I was weak by the ninth month. However, my mother-in-law did not take me to the hospital nor told my parents. She did not allow me to meet my parents. I was writing examinations during pregnancy. She accompanied me to the examination centres suspecting that I may meet my parents. She used to take me on an overcrowded bus, which is risky for a pregnant woman. They had not arranged appropriate transport to the hospital at the time of delivery. Consequentially, I had a premature baby.”

#### *Delivery of Baby Girl*

The delivery of a baby girl often increases violence against women. The support of family members was minimal in taking care of the girl child in a few cases. In such cases, a woman must manage postpartum stress alone.

Case 2 said that: “the physical and mental violence increased after giving birth a girl child. As a result, I was worried about the future of the child.”

Case 7 said:

“My husband was there in the village during the time of delivery. He came to see the baby after two days. My mother-in-law was taking care of the baby but abused me in various ways. She was demanding work from me even when I suffered from a high fever. She often keeps the baby left alone. Hence, I often have to manage work and baby.”

#### *The Suspicious Nature and the Misunderstandings*

The suspicious nature of husband and misunderstanding between the spouses is a crucial factor. It often leads to a lack of support from the husband concerning the wife’s work. In some cases, the husband’s suspicious nature had a terrible impact on the wife’s mental status. Many of the women suffered from depression, and a few even attempted suicide.

Case 1 said, “My husband was suspicious from the beginning. I am allowed to work to earn money. However, I should not talk to anyone. He suspects that even if I talk to a colleague. I was depressed with such persistent behaviour.”

Case 3 said:

“It was late in the night to finish a meeting at the office. A senior colleague dropped me at home. My husband was suspicious. He abused and slapped me. I was upset and attempted suicide by hanging myself. He stopped that time but continued to torture.”

#### *Not Seeking the Support of the Natal Family*

Marriage is perceived as a sacred bond between a man and a woman in Indian society. Hence, families insist on the sustenance of marital bonds. In the patrilocal residential pattern, women are expected to stay with the in-laws even when there is physical and mental mistreatment. The continued stay of a woman at the natal residence is treated as shame in the

village society. Hence, most often, women prefer not to reveal their suffering. They do not want to burden their parents. Thus, in almost all cases, there is a lack of support from the natal family, although the women suffer from various health problems. A few women stated, “I should not be a burden to my parents” and “I want to handle the situation myself,” which suggested that the single mothers wanted to handle their marital life independently.

### **Strategies of Family Management**

After a divorce, the management of the family for a single mother is very crucial. She faces multiple challenges. Economic vulnerability, social, emotional and physical security, education of the child, planning of the child’s future, and fostering a relationship with the child in the absence of father are some of the significant challenges faced by a single mother.

#### *Head of the Household and Making Decisions*

Being the head of the household, a single mother takes charge of decision making for the family and her child or children. She uses different strategies to take care of the child. They include keeping the child in a daycare centre, taking them to the workplace, taking care of any physical problems the child has, and keeping the child in a hostel. Single mothers suffer from mental stress as they must take full responsibility for the family. This further impacts their health and can lead to aggression, anxiety disorders, and depression. When they were unable to manage both work and family, most of the women would burst out at their children for any mistake. They often feel lonely.

Case 3 said:

“It was difficult to manage work, the home, and my children’s education. Sometimes, I feel tired after work. Hence, I shout at my children even for minor reasons such as not completing homework. So I decided to send them to a hostel.”

#### *Safety and Security*

Single mothers try to create a secure and healthy environment for themselves and their children. Hence, they cannot afford to fall sick for a long time, quit their job, or rest at home to lead a secure life. They are always in search of a better job to manage the family. In a few cases, they cannot have the luxury of job satisfaction. They may have to work under harsh conditions as well. A few respondents faced problems with the safety of the child. They expressed anxiety in the case of a girl child.

Case 15 explained:

“My superior at the current workplace does not treat me well. I wanted to quit the job, but I cannot as I have to take care of two daughters. I always worry about them as they are about to go to college.”

Case 14 said:

“A teenager from our colony assaulted my son, behaved obscenely. My son asked for a 'glucovita'<sup>4</sup> which he believes gives the energy to face anybody. The teenager made remarks about my character as well. I have warned him of severe consequences if it repeats.”

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<sup>4</sup> An energy drink or tablet.

### *Mental stress*

Single mothers also suffer from mental pressure as people around them try to take advantage of them sexually. In most cases, people approach these single mothers for marriage. Some people try to flirt them, and some make false promises which they never fulfill. Some single mothers succumb to such deceptive people and face the consequences. Such incidents further escalate their emotional problems.

Case 1 said, "People tried to approach me multiple times for sexual favours, but I carefully avoided such people. However, it is stressful to face such people frequently."

Case 25 said that "I have to manage to keep all those predatory men away from me. Maintaining a personality is important. However, we often encounter the men who try to take advantage of a single woman, even if she is a mother."

### *Taking Help from Friends*

Single mothers avoid taking help from parents or relatives for managing the family. They do not want to be a burden for parents. In a few cases, friends help in managing a family, which they feel comfortable to accept. A few single mothers have the opinion they must have a man's support to manage the family. The male person can be a family friend or a friend of their children. In such cases, neighbors are often suspicious of the woman. In general, the respondents believe that their friendship with a man should not create disturbances in his family.

Case 14 said, "'X' is a good friend; he knows about my life experiences and I feel morally supported. However, his wife was suspicious of our friendship. I spoke to her and explained about the support he offers as a friend."

In general, single mothers face difficulties to maintain a balanced and healthy relationship with children. Every time, they had to look into their children's psychological status and address the questions they ask about their father. Most single mothers do not prefer to say negative things about the father; instead, they say that he is not staying with them or living far away. However, a few women tell their children about divorce.

### **Conclusion**

Single mothers in India suffer from various constraints and challenges. Nowadays, women raise their concerns against violence. However, mothers who decide to take divorce and escape marital disturbances face a variety of challenges in managing the family. They face several constraints in everyday life despite their financial independence. They must look after the physical and emotional well-being of the children apart from their own self-care. Single mothers are likely to succumb to multiple vulnerabilities, including social, physical, emotional, and economical while managing them alone. The current research established the fact that managing a family alone has a cascading effect on single mother's physical and mental health. Lack of support from the natal family, family management strategies, and social stigma have a significant impact on a single mother's health. They cannot entirely move away from violent experiences as they face challenges in a variety of other forms. Single mothers in Indian society need a better space and support system to keep them healthy and enable them to manage the family.

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